

UC Davis

UC Davis Previously Published Works

Title

Beyond ambition

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1742g1b5>

Journal

Politics, Groups, and Identities, 7(4)

ISSN

2156-5503

Authors

Bernhard, Rachel
Holman, Mirya
Shames, Shauna
[et al.](#)

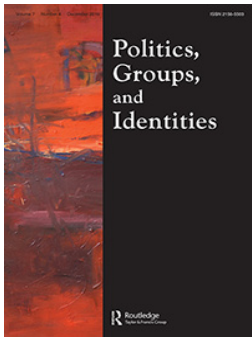
Publication Date

2019-10-02

DOI

10.1080/21565503.2019.1678883

Peer reviewed



Beyond ambition

Rachel Bernhard, Mirya Holman, Shauna Shames & Dawn Langan Teele

To cite this article: Rachel Bernhard, Mirya Holman, Shauna Shames & Dawn Langan Teele (2019) Beyond ambition, *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, 7:4, 815-816, DOI: [10.1080/21565503.2019.1678883](https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2019.1678883)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2019.1678883>



Published online: 13 Oct 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 336



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Beyond ambition

Women and minorities are numerically under-represented in politics around the globe. The problem is particularly acute in the American context, where winner-take-all electoral rules, relative party weakness, and high rates of incumbency limit the inroads members of non-dominant groups can make in politics. Yet both calls by corporate feminists to “lean in” and the “just ask” narrative common to scholars of politics present women’s lack of political ambition as the central obstacle to parity. These narratives focus on the promotion of relatively privileged women in masculine organizations and risk reproducing the powers-that-be with a feminine face.

The dialogues that follow push us to reconsider our understanding of women’s ambition. These essays – by comparativists and Americanists, scholars of gender, race, and class, of behavior and institutions – develop a rich and multi-faceted understanding of how women’s experiences and environments impact their interest in political careers and the diversity they bring to politics. In doing so, they seek to understand how multiple axes of privilege or disadvantage combine to challenge or reproduce the status quo.

In the first essay, “Women’s Recruiting Groups in the U.S.,” Rebecca Kreitzer and Tracy Osborn argue that non-profit campaign training organizations that recruit, train, or fund women to run for office play an important role shaping the pipeline of women in politics in weak party systems. Their study identifies hundreds of organizations in the first known census of U.S. women’s political organizations. A key revelation is that organizations of all partisan persuasions overwhelmingly rely on applicants’ stances on abortion as a litmus test for inclusion. This focus overshadows other policy agendas, including systematic attention to diversity, homogenizing the platforms of women – both Democrat and Republican – running.

In “Youth National Service and Women’s Political Ambition,” Cecilia Mo, Katharine Conn, and Georgia Anderson-Nilsson examine how service in Teach For America (TFA) prepares women for political office and increases their political ambition. By comparing admitted TFA applicants to those who just missed the admission cutoff score, they find that political ambition increased among those who had gone through TFA, with effects concentrated among those with more resources, no children, and in women of color. Their results demonstrate the importance of thinking holistically about potential candidates and what kinds of training might diversify the occupational backgrounds of those seeking political candidacy.

Jennie Sweet-Cushman further problematizes training programs for women in “See It; Be It? The Use of Role Models in Campaign Trainings for Women.” Such programs attempt interventions – such as helping women to identify role models – whose effects are not always clear. Sweet-Cushman finds that after such trainings, many trainees still did not identify a role model for themselves, and those who did were less likely to consider running as the role model seemed more impressive. Women’s intimidation by the prospect of having to be “perfect” may prompt them to opt out of politics, suggesting that training programs may encourage only some kinds of women, and discourage others.

Tiffany Barnes and Mirya Holman explore the kinds of diversity besides gender that women bring to the table. In a cross-sectional time-series study of Argentinean legislators, “Taking Diverse Backgrounds into Account in Studies of Political Ambition and Representation,”

they show that the election of women brings greater diversity of occupational and class representation, both to the full legislature and to individual committees. Moreover, women made the greatest contributions to occupational diversity in the Senate, an institution that typically favors elites and incumbents. The election of women can thus change other kinds of representation, even and perhaps especially in political institutions that are by design slow to change.

Finally, in “The Limits of Leaning In: Ambition, Recruitment, and Candidate Training in Comparative Perspective,” Jennifer Piscopo offers a critical reading of the *Lean In*-type argument for women’s absence from politics. She contrasts recruitment of women in America with many other countries, reminding us that recruitment is party-driven in many polities. As such, women’s ambitions may have little to do with their likelihood of making party lists. Even in systems with quotas, parties may work to subvert real improvements in descriptive representation, causing both voters and elites to assume that men – but not women – were elected based on their merits.

These pieces invite us to question what it means to say that women are less ambitious, given the diversity of women’s lived experiences and the varied institutional contexts in which they find themselves. Elections of women have the potential to bring more than just gender diversity and improved legislation on “women’s issues,” but the role of political institutions – particularly parties – in each polity shapes which kinds of women are recruited, trained, and ultimately elected. This Dialogue opens a new conversation about how structures of support, privilege, and institutions shape women’s ambitions and access to office.

Rachel Bernhard


Assistant Professor, UC Davis

 ribernhard@ucdavis.edu

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4104-0020>


Mirya Holman

Associate Professor, Tulane University

 mholman@tulane.edu


Shauna Shames

Assistant Professor, University of Rutgers-Camden

 shawanda@gmail.com

Dawn Langan Teele

Assistant Professor, University of Pennsylvania

 teele.academic@gmail.com